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17. ABSTRACT (MAX. 250 WORDS) Reading disabilities are divided into three categories: those caused by preceptual factors, those caused by psychosocial factors, and those caused by psycho-educational factors. Poor development of visual perception constitutes a disproportionate precentage of learning disability among Negroes and Puerto Ricans in central cities. Early childhood programs in visual perception development should be developed.

The psychosocial environment of disadvantaged youngsters breeds lethargy and aggression. Such students lack the training that makes a middle class child enjoy finishing a project and that builds up frustration tolerance. They are easily defeated and, without middle class models to emulate, their aspirations are low. School represents to them a value system that threatens them, or that bores them with its detachment from their reality.

Psychoeducational factors have become apparent through experimental testing of disadvantaged children. The reliability of standardized tests is low, but school reading ability can be measured with tests designed specifically for the disadvantaged population. Disadvantaged Negro and Puerto Rican children have trouble moving from the printed word to the heard or spoken word to the experience. They lack training in recognizing similarities and differences, structure and no structure, organization and disorganization. They lack concepts of time or chronology. They lack concepts for words, and when they are familiar with a concept, they lack the words that symbolize it.

These children need to be taught what they have not learned to do; they need to be taught the alphabet, to hear sounds in words, and to associate sounds with phonograms. Teachers should present, sequentially and thoroughly, every fine, specific behavior necessary for children to be able to read.

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DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF READING DIFFICULTIES IN PUERTO RICAN AND NEGRO COMMUNITIES

By: S. Alan Cohen
Director of Reading
Mobilization for Youth

I. INTRODUCTION

I want to discuss with you, today, the learning disabilities, in general, and the reading disabilities, in particular, of socially disadvantaged youth.

In the Northeast, a disproportionately large number of these disadvantaged people are Negroes and Puerto Ricans--a condition not entirely explained away by the popular scapegoat— LACK OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING. A host of causal factors have brought about their condition, not the least of which are their middle class neighbors' fears of dark skin, Spanish accent or both.

I suppose I should mention as a major factor in their condition, a socio-economic system that, at this stage of development, does not really know what to do with a large percentage of its population. Not unrelated to this is the timidity of the more intelligent political leaders, and the moral and ethical corruption of the majority of unintelligent political leaders who lack the courage, know-how or both to bring about change in that socio-economic system.

I mention this in passing to remind my colleagues in education, who generally do not suffer from the same moral and ethical flaws, but who are notorious for their lack of courage, that beyond our narrow professional obligations are the obligations of active citizenship. This obligation falls a little heavier on the shoulders of the more educated citizenry --

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.t least it should.

II. PERCEPTUAL FACTORS

Negroes and Puerto Ricans trapped in the central cities suffer from a disproportionate percentage of learning disabilities. In particular they manifest a high incidence of perceptual dysfunction.

I refer you to Benjamin Pasamanicks' studies of dysfunctions in lower class people. He found a high incidence of organicity and perceptual dysfunction in Negroes.[2] Deutsch's published descriptions of his work in Harlem and the Lower East Side of New York refer to the same problem.

In a survey of 400 junior high school children in a low socio-economic section of a New Jersey city, the same high incidence of dysfunctions and language disabilities were discovered. Again and again perceptual dysfunction and symptoms of organicity pop up in unusually large numbers of cases at Mobilization for Youth. For example, in one summer experimental program, thirteen of fifteen "mildly" retarded reading second graders showed moderate to severe visual-motor dysfunctions. In a typical Corrective Reading classroom, of the first fifteen children measured on Marianne Frostig's test of Visual Perception Development,[3] not one scored above the twentieth percentile.

Right now we are surveying a representative sample of first graders in the Mobilization for Youth area using the Frostig test. Our expectation is that an abnormally high incidence of poor visual perception development will be revealed.

Whether or not the public schools will implement an early childhood program in visual perception development as a result of this study depends upon their willingness to experiment with a radically different training program than the schools are used to. It will depend also, on our ability to build such a program and to train school people to imple-

ment the new techniques necessary. Right now there are questions about both these qualifications. However, the building of a program looks more promising this year because of the publishing of some new materials and the piloting of some new techniques in Mobilization for Youth's Experimental Summer School (1964). This pilot project will be described in a forthcoming book. The material referred to is G.N. Getman's P.A.S.S. manual entitled, Physiological Readiness,[4] supplementary training materials, Frostig's visual perception kit,[5] and techniques described in Kephart's Slow Learner in the Classroom.[6]

Incidentally, this problem of perceptual dysfunction is not unique to Puerto Ricans and Negroes. Socially disadvantaged children with perceptual dysfunctions can be OTHERS also. An OTHER is anyone who is not Puerto Rican or Negro, and refers most often to Caucasians of various ethnic backgrounds. One study I know of in Beria, Kentucky revealed the same problems in OTHERS (white Kentucky mountaineers). In my survey of 400 New Jersey children from socially disadvantaged areas referred to above, 50% of the population was OTHER (Polish and Ukranian American). The common factor in all these ethnic groups was low socio-economic status.

III. PSYCHO-SOCIAL FACTORS

You can't exist in the Johnsonian Great Society without reading again and again the descriptions of psycho-social deficits of disadvantaged children. I'm sure it is "old hat" to most of you. I repeat, however, without apology, the following characteristics of the environments from which schools in disadvantaged areas draw:

A. Substandard pre-natal and birth conditions prevail.

B. The family structure tends to be matriarchal.

C. In many disadvantaged areas there are often more jobs for women than for men. As a result, men prefer to disappear and save face than to stay at home as a symbol of failure. Male models are absent.

D. Living quarters are overcrowded. Privacy is unknown. Most of our children have never known what it is to sleep alone in their own beds.

What kind of pupil does this environment breed? Our Puerto Rican and Negro children have never experienced the delight in finishing a project. They have not had the training that builds - in reserves for frustration tolerance. They are easily defeated as early as grade one. They oscillate between lethargy and open aggression. Without inadequate middle class models to emulate, their aspirations tend to be much lower than their middle class brethren.

Having been conditioned to the insatiable curiosity for school-oriented tasks in the early elementary school child from middle class homes, I was shocked when I first observed a third grade class of Puerto Rican and Negro children. They were listless. When not tuned out, they were bouncing back with utter disorganization.

The school, the book, and the teacher seem to represent to the lower class child a system of values and mores that either:

A. Threaten him so much that he flees (tunes out) or fights (acts out).

B. Or bores him so with its detachment from his reality, that he tunes out in apathy or acts out in frustration.

It seems to me that the transgressions against the ethical and legal rules of the school are, with middle class children, defenses against this threat or the more dreadful ennui.

IV. PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL FACTORS

Over the past two years we have used a variety of tests and clinical observations in a number of different educational situations.

In general, we find reliability of standardized tests administered to disadvantaged populations lower than with middle class children. The problem of testing is not one of content. As long as the school demands certain tasks, we need tests to measure achievement in these tasks. The problem seems to be statistical validity. We must, for example, measure school reading achievement; but we must measure school reading with tests designed specifically for this population.

At Mobilization for Youth we have designed two experimental tests of reading. We use, in addition, semi-formal oral and silent reading tests, all sorts of personality tests and clinical observation. Lately, I have found the Illinois Test of Psycho-linguistic Abilities to be extremely revealing of our population's problems.

What have we found? Socially disadvantaged Negro and Puerto Rican children have little experience in labelling things. They have rarely been taught the polarities we take for granted in middle class children who enter school; for example, hot-cold, up-down, good-bad, in-out, etc. They lack training in recognizing similarities and differences, structure and no structure, organization and disorganization. They lack concepts of time or chronology. They lack concepts for words, and when they are familiar with a concept or an experience, they lack the words that symbolize it.

Because they do not see relationships we take for granted, they have trouble generalizing. They look as if they have never been weaned from the pre-logic stage. They have great difficulty with abstractions. All of this means that their IQ's are low because they have not learned these basic skills which underly our intelligence testing.

In almost every case of retarded reading, auditory discrimination of sounds in words is low. Very fine visual discrimination is weak,

but visual memory for sight words is high. Word attack skills are practically non existent in most of our disadvantaged children with reading difficulties.

Stated concisely, socially disadvantaged retarded readers have two basic problems:

A. They can't break the code. They have trouble moving from the visual symbol (printed word) to the oral-aural symbol (spoken or heard word) to the experience.

B. Even when they break the code and move from the visual to the oral-aural, they cannot reach the final closure of the experience. The word is meaningless because the original experience is lacking. The printed word "lawn" may be eventually pronounced, but it will never be "read" unless "lawn" symbolizes an experience for the reader.

It seems to me that I have described the severely retarded reader in general. That is, limiting our consideration of causal factors to the psycho-educational area, the reading disability syndrome of the socially disadvantaged child is the same as the reading disability of the socially advantaged child. The difference is in quantity. More Puerto Rican and Negro kids are severely retarded in reading than are OFMsRs. Perhaps the psycho-social factors can help explain the discrepancy in incidence of retardation. It cannot, however, explain or suggest a feasible remediation. That is, as it presently functions, the school cannot significantly affect psycho-social factors that may, in time, result in a reduced reading retardation rate.

How, then, do we remediate the socially disadvantaged child? We teach him what he has not learned to do. We teach him the letters of the alphabet. We teach him to hear sounds in words. Then we teach him to associate sounds with phonograms, always careful to preteach concepts and meanings. We do what we are not used to doing with middle class kids--we thoroughly, sequentially present, step by step, every fine, specific behavior he needs to be able to read. We break out of our professional

rubrics imprisoned in the sancrosanct walls of basal readers and teach the socially disadvantaged child to break the code.

We use large muscle tasks at the beginning. We teach sight words and phonics. We teach visual discrimination of words, not sail boats. We teach reading all day, every day, not twice a week or 30 minutes per day.

I wish I had more time to be specific. Some time this year I will be publishing a book on teaching reading to socially disadvantaged children. It will describe the materials and techniques we have found successful with Negro and Puerto Rican children in New York and New Jersey. I can hear a former teacher of mine, Dr. Donald Durrell, reacting to the methods and materials described in that book. "This is good stuff," he'll probably say, "but how does this method differ from good, individualized, high intensity learning in middle class kids?"

My answer ---"It doesn't."

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